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The Red-Cockaded Woodpecker

Introduction

Eglin Air Force Base is the largest Air Force base in the free world, including 724 square miles of longleaf pine, mixed hardwoods, wetlands and coastal dunes located in the middle of Northwest Florida's “Emerald Coast” and about 130,000 square miles of controlled airspace overlying land and water. In this setting, Eglin conducts its primary mission of full-service air armament development through weapons system research, development, testing and evaluation; training; space operations; and base and range support. While fulfilling its mission, Eglin also manages its natural resources, acting as a steward to protect plants and animals for future generations.

At Home in the Longleaf Pines

Making its home in the longleaf pine forests is the red-cockaded woodpecker, which is listed by the federal government as an endangered species. This shy, 7-inch long, black-and-white bird is rarely seen. The bird?s name comes from the tiny red spot just behind the eyes of males. This spot looks like a cockade, an ornament worn on a hat as a badge. Native to the Southeastern United States, its numbers have been dwindling due largely to decreased habitat. Because more than 90 percent of the longleaf pine forests in the Southeast have been cut down, Eglin's stands of longleaf pine represent a rare resource for this endangered bird.

The red-cockaded woodpecker is unique in that it is the only bird that makes its nest cavities in live, mature pines.

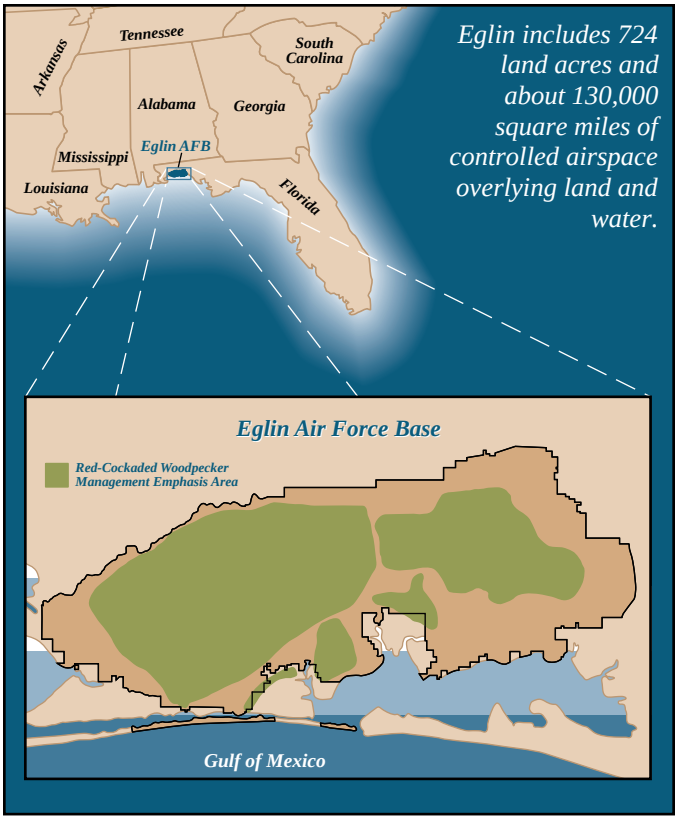
At Eglin, the bird typically chooses longleaf pines that are more than 90 years old. Only a small percentage of the trees at Eglin are this old. The bird also prefers trees that tower over low vegetation, such as wiregrass and a few short trees. It forages for insects nearby, usually in pine trees over 30 years old. Because of these habits, only a few forest areas are able to meet its habitat needs.

Family Life

Red-cockaded woodpeckers live in groups called clans. A clan consists of two to nine adult birds, with one breeding pair per clan. The other birds act as helpers to incubate the eggs, feed the young, make cavities and defend territory. Each clan member tries to have a cavity for roosting with usually only one bird per cavity. A group of cavity trees used and defended by a single clan is called a cluster.

The Problem: Lack of Habitat

Lack of suitable habitat is one of the bird's most serious problems, even at Eglin. Other trees have grown into its range and under the longleaf pines, limiting where the red-cockaded woodpecker can live and forage. In addition, many of the longleaf pine forests are broken up into areas too small for the bird. Natural resource managers at Eglin have identified five main areas of habitat, which vary in quality and cover approximately 260,000 acres. Two major areas with over 50 active clusters have been found at the base.



Habitat Protection through Forest Management

Forest management plays a key role in assisting the red-cockaded woodpecker. Five general actions can help:

- Retain existing cavity trees (for nest and roost sites)
- Provide trees for new cavities (a place for the chicks)
- Promote adequate foraging (plenty of insects)
- Control hardwoods within the cluster (maintain the habitat)
- Provide future cluster sites (a place for future generations)

To accomplish these goals, Eglin natural resource managers developed individual habitat prescriptions for each cluster site. The major need now is to control encroaching sand pines and hardwoods within these sites. This is being accomplished by a number of methods, including:

- Intentional burning (known as prescribed burning)
- Mechanical removal (cutting down unwanted hardwood trees)
- Limited herbicide application

In addition to improving habitat, these measures help improve present and future red-cockaded woodpecker nesting habitat. By providing the right conditions, the longleaf pine can slowly spread. Planting longleaf pine seedlings can help in some areas.

Natural resource managers are working to improve reproductive success of the bird by creating artificial cavities for nests and roosts, introducing females to solitary males, and monitoring the birds' status.

The Role of Fire

Planned burning is the most important tool at Eglin, allowing natural resource managers to return the longleaf pine forest habitat to its natural state. In the past, natural fires from lightning strikes were suppressed and put out. Natural resource managers now realize that natural fires removed encroaching species while helping the native species. For example, the longleaf pine survived because of its thick bark. Animals and birds escaped, many to return when ash from the fire fed the growth of new, low-lying plants. Natural fires also prevented the buildup of fuel in a forest, preventing intense fires that destroyed even hardy species. By using controlled fires now, natural resource managers can recreate the conditions necessary for the native forest and for the red-cockaded woodpeckers' continued survival.

An example of the forest's ability to renew itself was seen several years ago at Yellowstone National Park. Intense blazes caused concern for the environment and sparked fears that the forest might not regenerate. But just a few years later, biologists are reporting a remarkable rebirth. Controlled fires at Eglin will directly benefit not only the red-cockaded woodpecker, but also 16 to 18 threatened and endangered animals and at least 108 species of plants. By creating an overall healthier ecosystem, controlled fires at Eglin also give the military mission planners more flexibility; thus, man's work and nature's work can and do complement each other. In addition, burning the forest in a controlled fashion reduces the level of wildfire threat to Eglin and neighboring communities.